



Idaho Virtual University Consortium  
Phase 1 — Current Status Report

Staged Website Background

Prepared for: Presidents Council  
Idaho State Board of Education  
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## SCENARIO ASSUMPTIONS

- **The website is a prototype.** It is designed to suggest some important considerations in designing some form of a virtual university for Idaho. It is designed to suggest how a web-based front-end to a series of sophisticated databases might present itself to IVU's potential clientele.

- **The website is "pretend."** It features virtual degree programs, virtual certification programs and virtual enrichment programs. The example programs and courses were chosen to represent viable examples, consistent with virtual programs and courses already being offered at institutions (traditional and commercial) across the country. In this sense, one of the major design parameters of the prototype was that it shows "competitive reality." More details on this point further on.

- **The website represents primarily the view of the IVU system provided to visitors** who are interested in enrolling in IVU courses. For that reason, the design aims to be clean, crisp and as straightforward and uncomplicated as possible. Visitors to the site should be able to get to the areas of most interest to them within 2-3 mouse clicks. Cutting-edge, DHTML design was not used, as it was too inaccessible at this date to use in a prototype designed to accommodate the general online public.

- **Any real version of the IVU website would have as much *intelligence* built-in as possible.** This intelligence would depend entirely on the quality of the databases behind the site and the quality of programming utilizing those databases and bringing relevant data to the web-based front end that interacts with the user. That intelligence is virtually impossible to fake in the time allowed, so it is represented in the prototype in the form of examples (where possible) and in the form of textual notes elsewhere.

- **The "Log-In" section of the prototype represents a design within a design.** That section is intended for "already enrolled" students. This means that users entering the IVU site through the "Log-In" portal would already met the requirements for workstation configuration and browsers required of all IVU enrollees. For this reason, this section should have the very highest level of web design possible. No attempt was made to "fake" this area. There was not sufficient time to even attempt to do so. The Log-In section appears only to remind us of the need for its existence.

- Once the student logs into the IVU website using the Log-In section, their user ID and password, **the IVU website front-end would utilize all known data about that student to** make their interaction with the site as value-added and convenient as possible. Again, the success of this goal of being highly value-added for the user depends upon the site's ability to utilize it's various databases of information and employ sound HCI design principles.

- The programs (degree, certification and enrichment) used in the prototype were chosen as examples of the types of programs that could be successful as part of a virtual university program and that resemble programs that are successful in existing virtual programs.

- The programs (degree, certification and enrichment) used in the prototype represent **program examples that might appeal to 3 potential major User Groups**: 1) Adult professionals who require advanced education credentials, 2) Working adults who require advanced technical training. Note: This second group could easily include traditionally-aged (18-22 years old) students who, for whatever reasons, are not able to attend institutions of higher education, and 3) Lifelong learners who do not require additional formal education credentials or up-to-date training for the current job market.

- The programs (degree, certification and enrichment) used in the prototype are **fictitious** in that the designer of the prototype made them up. Despite the fact that these programs do not literally exist, they do very much represent *competitive reality*. **Competitive reality** means that programs used in the prototype closely resemble programs/courses **in use right now** by colleges, universities, and commercial education enterprises offering online programs. The fees and credit hours used in the prototype are very similar to those used in existing programs. So, while the example programs, course selections, costs, credit hours, etc. are not literally true, they represent accurately some of the currently available courses offered as virtual programs (degree and otherwise). All of the example programs and courses used are based on courses and programs currently available in online-only formats.

## WEBSITE DESIGN PARAMETERS AND DESIGN ASSUMPTIONS

The following are some of the design assumptions and design parameters used in creating the Idaho Virtual University prototype website:

- ◆ **The site is aimed at working adult professionals.** This is the group most likely (based on work with other virtual education programs) to be highly motivated to enroll in online programs, most likely to require the high convenience factors associated with virtual learning programs, most willing to pay premium prices for premium services, and most likely to provide repeat business. This group tends to have more money than time and to consider their time extremely valuable. They are also anxious to achieve higher level, better paying, more challenging professional positions. They recognize the need to find a way to continue their education/training while still being able to hold down a fulltime, professional position.
- ◆ The site is aimed at working adults or adults who very much **need to be working and who are motivated to seek cutting edge technical training** in order to obtain better paying jobs with better long-term chances for advancement. This user group may want to enter a new area of employment or advance to a higher level in an existing area of employment. They are often most interested in intense training/certification programs that offer high level training/certification and, in turn, will allow them to quickly improve their skills, knowledge and earning potential.
- ◆ **The site also offers programs of interest to lifelong learners.** This group might be best described as aging Boomers who have secure careers or who simply do not require any additional education or training that is career or job-related. This group is growing older but is still intellectually vital and interested in a wide-range of topics. Programs aimed at this group may relate to current technologies, but they may just as well relate to evaluating antiques and collectibles or getting the most out of a trip to Rome.
- ◆ In keeping with the site's assumed primary user groups, **the degree programs offered are *graduate level* degree programs.** In keeping with the majority of current online program and course offerings, the graduate-only programs used in the prototype emphasize degree programs and courses that feature either business-type data and/or hard or scientific data types. Such courses form the initial core of most virtual university offerings. These courses also tend to have content that is well suited to digital environments and distribution methods.
- ◆ In keeping with the site's assumed primary user groups, **the certification programs offered tend to emphasize cutting edge technology training** that match up well with "hot" ticket jobs in the current marketplace. In keeping with the majority of current online certification programs and course offerings, the certification programs used in the prototype emphasize networking skills, programming skills, desktop software, 2-D and 3-D graphics, and digital multimedia technologies. Such courses form the initial core of most virtual university offerings. These courses tend to have content that is well suited to digital environments and distribution methods. These courses are often characterized by intense training that makes certificate holders immediately employable in the technical marketplace.
- ◆ **The IVU prototype was designed to add value to and to meet the goals of the *targeted user groups*, not** to reproduce the organizational structure of the universities involved nor to facilitate how the university does business. In keeping with this parameter every attempt was made to model convenient, one-stop shopping for the potential IVU client.
- ◆ **The IVU site attempts to incorporate obvious changes in the Education Model** of how educational entities "do business" with their clientele. See the section entitled: Notes about Virtual Education Programs and Changes in the Education Model.

## NOTES ABOUT VIRTUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND CHANGES IN THE EDUCATION MODEL

The following covers items of note that emerged while examining approximately 20 existing online-only (virtual) education programs (degree and certification) and the institutions or companies offering such programs. The IVU prototype website reflects these notes and modeling changes wherever possible. See also the section entitled: Website Design Parameters and Design Assumptions. All virtual learning programs are in their initial phases, but the following notes represent commonalities shared by all the programs and therefore may be of interest in designing some form of an Idaho Virtual University.

◆ **There are many ways to add value for clients, but possibly the most valuable features involve saving the client's time.**

Arguably, time is the currency of the 2000s and doing anything that makes the client feels his/her time is being wasted is a very costly mistake. All design considerations for virtual programs must be made with this in mind.

◆ **Virtual programs begin with tightly focused, targeted client groups,** often only one or two such groups are chosen. The more focused the programs, often the more successful, so the choice of targeted user groups is essential and drives much of the design process.

◆ **Virtual programs mean that everything is done online.** No visits to campus are required for any reason. For the most part, physical locations of the educational entities sponsoring the programs are of no interest to the clients. Exceptions would include programs that are offered through some form of "learning centers" where broadcasts can be received and properly configured workstations are available. The vast majority of highly successful virtual programs, however, are focused on remote delivery to the clients' desktop, wherever that desktop and client happen to be.

◆ **"Chat" environments are favored for real-time, online communications or meetings,** but right now the majority of virtual courses and programs rely on email and listservs for intra-class communication, with set amounts of time prescribed for how long it will take an instructor to reply to a client's question. These preset "reply times" are taken very seriously and upheld.

◆ **Many universities and education companies make strategic partnerships with companies who need to target the users enrolled in online courses.** This frequently results in win-win deals for both the universities and the companies and better prices on materials for students, but the structuring of these partnerships, how and what type of information is provided are still very much under discussion.

◆ **Universities may have very different missions and end goals compared to for-profit, commercial education ventures.** One particular issue of note is that of the profitability of virtual education programs. Commercial, online education ventures must be mindful of profit margins to stay in business. Traditional institutions of higher education may be focused solely on whether or not their programs are meeting the needs of and matching the value of the budget dollars provided by tax-paying citizens. In each case, the bottom line is that the students who spend their money must believe that the cost (in every sense) of the program was worth it to them. Most commercial online education ventures have no intention of competing for the traditionally aged undergraduate seeking a traditional four-year degree. They are competing for the dollars of those able or willing to spend money on cutting-edge training that has immediate applicability in the marketplace. Whatever the compelling mission of the organizations involved, any group wishing to compete for those same disposable income dollars must remember that they will be competing with for-profit ventures for clients' educational dollars and the convenience and quality of the end product is all the clients are likely to be concerned with.

◆ **Most online degree programs are currently offered solely at the graduate level and tend to deal with programs that deal with executive business and management programs or that depend largely on hard data.** These programs are characterized by close tie-ins with the traditional departments, faculty and programs. **Course materials often do not reflect good design principles for content designed for use in digital environments.** Compared to the high quality of Discovery Channel specials, the programs often seem of poor quality and tend toward the "talking heads" style of low-cost, community television production. Exceptions to this stand out in sharp contrast by way of their quality. Some course content is being out-sourced to companies who specialize in this area. This is a trend likely to continue and grow steadily.

◆ **Most online certification programs are characterized by courses that are relatively short in duration but very intense and very focused in scope.** Faculty tend to be practitioners who work actively in the field in which they are instructing. Course design and content design tends to be of higher quality and to reflect a significantly better understanding of digital environments and distribution mechanisms than online graduate programs. Course content and instructors seem to work strictly on a contractual, course-by-course basis and often have no previous or ongoing ties to the sponsoring organization. Some course content is being out-sourced to companies who specialize in this area. This is a trend likely to continue and grow steadily.

- ◆ **Most online programs (degree and certification) do not recognize any difference between “full time” and “part time” students** since that doesn’t matter in a virtual environment. Course costs are set either on an individual basis (most common to certification programs) or as a set fee for all courses in a given program (most common to degree programs.)
- ◆ **Most online programs do not recognize any difference between in-state and out-of-state students.** In the case of many state institutions, they are actively lobbying their legislatures to remove existing legal barriers to taking this route.
- ◆ **Many online programs do not recognize any specific semester/term periods.** For obvious reasons, this is more common in certification programs than in degree programs, especially degree programs tied to traditional universities. Commercial firms who offer accredited degree programs often do not recognize terms, but instead rely on completion of a certain number of course units in a given period of time. The time period is linked to when an online candidate enrolls, but there are no “common” enrollment periods that cover or pertain to all enrollees.
- ◆ **Online programs (degree and certification) are often linked to the state governor’s focus on specific businesses and industries.** For example, one set of online degree programs focus on biotechnology because of a focus by the governor on bringing biomedical and biotechnical industries to the state.
- ◆ **Most online programs require all students to take some type of online searching skills course.** University librarians or information management professionals often design these courses. They are designed to make sure students can locate major information resources online. These course are very low cost and most are designed with sufficient intelligence to repeat questions/assignments at progressively more simple levels until the user begins to have success. The course then brings the user up to speed until they are able to pass the required level of searching ability. This ensures that all enrollees start with a similar basic, minimal searching skill set. Most programs require the student to pass this course before progressing much beyond enrollment in a single course (not including the online searching skills course.)

- ◆ **Many online programs include some creative, hands-on companions to online courses** such as internships that immediately apply skills and knowledge the enrollee is supposed to be acquiring online.



From Nancy Szofran  
Re Preliminary Material for IDA Final Report Phase 1 Spreadsheet  
1/28/00

To the Reader:

The data in the following Appendix is representative in nature and not definitive. The time available to complete the compilation was limited. We tested one approach to understand the challenges of generating revenue data. The results of that test are a part of the spreadsheet. Today's administrative and accounting systems in higher education do not generally support the identification of revenue on a course-by-course basis. Discussion regarding the usefulness of this data balanced with the effort to gather the data are ongoing.

We want to acknowledge and thank the university and college staff members whose committed efforts in November 1999 and December 1999 made the compilation possible. The experience with this phase of the project helps us understand what the next steps should be in building the Idaho Virtual University Consortium.

Thank you.